**1.2 Who am I?**

Let us start with an example of an individual and his identity which illustrates the link between the personal and the social. The social scientist Madan Sarup uses the example of his passport, which gives information about his identity in an official sense. Our passports name, describe and place us. A passport describes an individual; it names *one* person. It also states to which *group*, in particular which nation, that person belongs:

I have three passports, all British … In the first one, I am a young man with a lot of hair and a confident smile. My height is 5ft 8in and I am a school teacher. In my second passport photograph, most of the hair has gone. I have a white beard and a serious expression. My height is now 1.73 metres and I am a college lecturer. In the third passport, the smaller red one, I am bald. Again I have a serious expression, but now my face is heavily lined. A friend asks: which is the *real* you? Of course, people see me in many different ways … I want to have a closer look at my red passport… At the top are the words ‘European community’ … The passport refers to my nationality – British Citizen.

(Sarup, 1996, p. xiv)



**Figure 1:** Examples of UK passports

Three passports offer details about identities, which are different, yet each belongs to the same person. Physical appearance is important, but it changes over time. Sarup's friend asks, ‘which is the real you?’ This suggests that there is not only continuity in the name of the person who possesses the passports, but that there might be a fixed, true, ‘real’ identity which could be uncovered. The personal identity of the named person includes their experience and life story. Continuity is important to our understanding of who we are, but changes suggest that identities are not fixed and constant; they change too.

We have some information here about what Sarup looks like. At one level physical appearance is how we ‘read’ people when we meet them. The body is also an important component of personal identity. Sarup cites physical appearance as the principal example of what is revealed here, but there are many other aspects of the body which have an impact on identity. Size, shape, disability, sex, all influence our experience of who we are and who we can be.

A passport picks out other key aspects of identity, which include occupation, nationality and age, all of which position us and give us a place in the society in which we live. However, it does not say anything about *how* we occupy these positions or about what they mean to us. We do not know how Sarup himself feels. Passport details cannot reveal a person's feelings. We need more information:

I think of [British Citizenship] as a formal category, because it does not express how I feel about it. I am not proud to be ‘British'; it reminds me of the scars of imperialism, the days of the Raj. I feel more sympathetic to being a citizen of the European Community, but here too I feel ambivalent. I would rather be a citizen of a federal European Community, but friends remind me that the concept of the ‘Fortress Europe’ is a Euro-centric strategy to maintain the power and privilege of the ‘First World’.

(Sarup, 1996, p.xv)

Here Sarup suggests that he identifies more actively with being a European than a British citizen. To identify with a nation or group like this is to take up a *collective identity*. However, only one UK identity is offered by the passport. I notice that my own passport gives my place of birth, in Wales, but currently calls me a British and not a Welsh citizen. That Britain is a multi-ethnic, multicultural society is not acknowledged here either. Sarup refers to the colonial past which positions him in a particular relationship with ‘Britishness’. This history is not recognised in the passport. The British Empire, however, used to have a place, with the old blue passport which referred to ‘The United Kingdom of Great Britain and her Colonies’, but the more recent EC and the new EU passports have no place for multi-ethnicity as yet. Those who hold the UK passport are grouped together as if we share one British identity. What we have in common is that we do not have another national identity (unless we have dual citizenship). We are not French or Chinese nationals. Identity is thus also marked by difference; that is, by indicating what we are not.

The very fact of having a passport at all confers identity. Particular passports provide rights of citizenship which are denied those who do not possess a passport at all. The passport illustrates some of the ways in which identities are institutionally constructed, and in this case the UK state, through legislation, plays a very powerful part in defining the identities of its citizens, especially in making some identities possible and others impossible. In the UK, birth has to be registered in order for the child to exist officially at all. Birth certificates, like death certificates, require that the person be classified as female or male. There is no alternative or scope for negotiation. At present, whatever an individual does in life to change their gender identity, the death certificate has to accord with the birth certificate, which cannot be changed retrospectively. Other examples of the official production and classification of an identity include ID cards, credit cards, membership cards, driving licences or any other sort of licence.

**Activity 1**

Think about your own passport or any other identity card or official document. What does it say about you? Does it suggest groups with whom you share an identity and those from whom you are different? Does this suggest several different identities? What is omitted? What is the importance of such institutional identities?

[Reveal discussionHide discussion](http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=399036&section=1.1.2)

**Discussion**

**Comment**

The kind of information revealed in an official document like a passport has many omissions about what identities and allegiances may be important in our daily lives. Fortunately, the state does not expose our political allegiances, community involvement, sexuality or status as a parent, although these also combine to produce our identities. The apparently single identity of citizenship leaves out all the contradictions about who we are and the multiplicity of identities each of us has.

Institutions like the state do have the power to restrict individual or collective freedom to adopt some identities. We probably do not think about these restrictions nor about national identity or citizenship very often, except when we are denied the rights associated with citizenship.

**Summary**

* The passport example illustrates the tension between how I see myself and how I am seen by others, between the personal and the social.
* Institutions such as the state play an important role in constructing identities.
* Difference is very clearly marked in relation to national identity.
* Such official categories contain omissions and cannot fully accommodate the personal investment we have in our identities, nor the multiple identities we have.